

## The Prophetic Conflict: Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism, and World War II\*

The brothers Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr stood astride mid-century America as two of the nation's greatest theological luminaries. Their intellectual trajectories witnessed a respectful, decades-long dialogue of shared doctrinal convictions with periodic differences in emphases or interpretation. Yet, their only public disagreement occurred not over a theological dispute but over a foreign policy incident in Asia.<sup>1</sup>

Japan's invasion of Manchuria in 1931 heralded the international crisis of the 1930s and the eventual advent of World War II. Most American Protestants of the era remained enamored of the pacifism and idealism of the previous decade, embodied in the League of Nations and the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact outlawing war. Moreover, the deepening economic travails of the Great Depression turned American attention even more inward to the nation's acute domestic challenges. How, then, to respond to Japan's brazen aggression, so unexpected and so contrary to the prevailing ethos? H. Richard Niebuhr penned an article in the *Christian Century*, mainline Protestantism's seminal journal, whose title captured his message: "The Grace of Doing Nothing." While lamenting Japan's militarism, H. Richard believed that the guilt of the United States as a nation and American Christians as individuals undermined any moral standing to respond. "The American Christian realizes that Japan is following the example of his own country and that he has little real ground for believing America to be a disinterested nation...[since] its righteous indignation is not wholly righteous." Instead, American Christians should refrain from acting while instead placing their hope in a sovereign deity's judgment over Japan, the United States, and all nations. To be sure, "the inactivity of radical Christianity is not the inactivity of those who call evil good; it is the inaction of those who do not judge their neighbors because they cannot fool themselves into a sense of superior righteousness."<sup>2</sup>

\* The author wishes to thank Miha Vindis for his invaluable assistance with the research for this article, and Jeremi Suri, Frank Gavin, Elizabeth Borgwardt, Gary Dorrien, Colin Dueck, K. Healan Ghaston, and two anonymous *Diplomatic History* reviewers for their insightful feedback.

1. Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (San Francisco, CA, 1987), 132. Fox describes this exchange as their "only published disagreement."

2. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," *Christian Century*, March 23, 1932, 378–80.

Invited by the editors to respond, Reinhold wrote an article in the subsequent issue titled "Must We Do Nothing?" He agreed with his brother's lament of America's national guilt and corrupted motives, yet rejected the call to inaction because "there will never be a wholly disinterested nation." Part of H. Richard's error, he believed, was in demanding an impossible ethic of love from the nation-state. "No nation can ever be good enough to save another nation purely by the power of love . . . justice is probably the highest ideal to which human groups can aspire. And justice . . . inevitably involves the assertion of right against right and interest against interest until some kind of harmony is achieved." Even this harmony would remain elusive since "as long as the world of man remains a place where nature and God, the real and the ideal, meet, human progress will depend upon the judicious use of the forces of nature in the service of the ideal." Though he eschewed the use of military force, he believed "we must try to dissuade Japan from her military venture, but must use coercion to frustrate her designs if necessary."<sup>3</sup> In policy terms, this meant his advocacy of an economic embargo on Japan and a boycott by American consumers of Japanese products.

This debate was much more significant than a mere familial theological disagreement. In Reinhold's case, this article anticipated the "Christian realism" he was to develop more fully over the course of his life, beginning later that year in his seminal book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. It also pointed toward his break from pacifism, the nativity of his substantial influence on international relations, and the inauguration of his role over the coming decade as one of the most prominent voices for American resistance to Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, and eventual intervention in World War II.

Why does Niebuhr matter? In the midst of the contemporary resurgence in interest in his thought, he remains one of the most influential American intellectuals of the twentieth century, who occupied a unique position at the intersection of elite acclaim and popular recognition. Featured on the cover of *Time* and in the pages of *Readers Digest*, *Fortune*, and *Life* magazines, recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, frequent contributor to periodicals such as the *Atlantic*, *New Republic*, and *Nation*, close friend of figures such as Felix Frankfurter, George Kennan, Adlai Stevenson, and John Kenneth Galbraith, he was famously described by Kennan as "the father of all of us."<sup>4</sup> Taking the sum of Niebuhr's life and thought, Robert Moats Miller, while critical of Niebuhr on some normative

3. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Must We Do Nothing," *Christian Century*, March 30, 1932, 415–17. For a thoughtful discussion of this exchange that sees the core of the dispute being the Niebuhr brothers' different understandings of "tragedy," see also John D. Barbour, "Niebuhr Versus Niebuhr: The Tragic Nature of History," *Christian Century*, November 21, 1984, 1096–99. See also Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 132–34.

4. Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role and Legacy* (Philadelphia, PA, 1992), 243. Though Kennan later could not recall using this phrase, Brown provides convincing evidence both that Kennan did describe Niebuhr in this manner, and that it was a description appreciated by others such as Dean Acheson and Kenneth Thompson, the latter of whom recalled hearing Kennan utter the words in question. See Brown, 304 note 49.

issues, still concludes that “such was Niebuhr’s influence on an entire generation of American (and British and European) intellectuals, secular as well as religious, that to know Niebuhr is to gain some understanding of the thought of an era.”<sup>5</sup> Hence while scholars of American religion, theology, and social ethics continue to devote considerable attention to Niebuhr, he also merits the interest of historians of American foreign relations. In this regard, most of the attention he has received from diplomatic historians concerns his role as a voice of liberal anticommunism in the early Cold War, exemplified by Walter Lafeber’s observation that “not since Jonathan Edwards’ day in the 1740s had an American theologian so affected his society... he provided a historical basis and rationale for the tone, the outlook, the unsaid, and often unconscious assumptions of this period.”<sup>6</sup> In short, Niebuhr’s influence extended far beyond the pulpits and seminaries of ecclesiastical America.

Yet the evolution of Niebuhr’s posture toward fascism during the 1930s presents a notable chapter in American foreign relations as well. There are at least four reasons for this. First, it was during this decade that Niebuhr became an intellectual progenitor of realism as a theory of international relations, and developed the ideas that influenced subsequent realists such as Hans Morgenthau and Kenneth Waltz. In the words of former Morgenthau student Kenneth Thompson, Niebuhr’s “formative influence on thinkers such as Hans J. Morgenthau in the United States and E.H. Carr in Britain was early, direct, and unquestioned. Both Morgenthau in *Scientific Man versus Power Politics* and Carr in *The Twenty Years’ Crisis* quoted Niebuhr more than any other thinker.”<sup>7</sup> Morgenthau himself later called Niebuhr the “greatest living political philosopher of America.”<sup>8</sup> And while the zenith of Niebuhr’s prominence came in the 1940s and 1950s, he began

5. Cited in Justus D. Doenecke, “Reinhold Niebuhr and His Critics: The Interventionist Controversy in World War II,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 64 (1995): 459–81. Doenecke provides a balanced exploration of the theological and exegetical issues at stake in the debates between Niebuhr and the anti-interventionists.

6. Lafeber quoted in Michael G. Thompson, “An Exception to Exceptionalism: A Reflection on Reinhold Niebuhr’s Vision of ‘Prophetic’ Christianity and the Problem of Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (September 2007): 836. Thompson puts forth a perceptive overview of the evolution of Niebuhr’s theologically informed thought on foreign policy through the prism of the “prophetic,” a theme shared by this article. However, Thompson fails to account for the significant role that geopolitical events of the 1930s, especially the rise of fascism, played in influencing Niebuhr’s thought. For other treatments of Niebuhr in the Cold War, see Jonathan Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle Against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York, 2011); Jason Stevens, *God-Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America’s Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2010); William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York, 2008); Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York, 2003); and Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD, 1991).

7. Kenneth Thompson, “Niebuhr and the Foreign Policy Realists,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited: Engagements with an American Original*, ed. Daniel Rice (Grand Rapids, MI, 2009), 139. Note that Thompson identifies himself as the person to whom Kennan described Niebuhr as “the father of all of us.”

8. Quoted in Thompson, “An Exception to Exceptionalism,” 836.



**Figure 1:** Reinhold Niebuhr was awarded one of nine honorary degrees at Yale's commencement exercises on June 9, 1942. Front row, left to right, are: Vannevar Bush, president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington; T. V. Soong, China's Foreign Minister; Yale President Charles Seymour; Charles Merz, editor of the New York Times; and General Frank R. McCoy, president of the Foreign Policy Association. Second row, left to right, are: Robert R. Williams of New York, chemical director of the Bell Telephone Laboratories; Lieut. Commander Albert R. Behnke, Jr., Naval Physician; Prof. Frederick A. Pottle; Rev. Reinhold Niebuhr, Professor of Applied Christianity at the Union Theological Seminary; Robert A. Lovett, Assistant Secretary of War for Air; and Artemus L. Gates, Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Air.

developing and articulating his realism in the context of the international crises of the 1930s. In Campbell Craig's description, beginning in the 1930s Niebuhr "put forth an analysis of international politics that established a foundation for future American realist thinking."<sup>9</sup> However, as will be discussed, Niebuhr's distinctive variation of "Christian realism" differed from modern evolutions of realism in important ways, such as its foundation in human nature, its inclusion of ideology as a factor, and its explicit embrace of moral judgments. Second, the roots of Niebuhr's role as a prominent Cold Warrior also lie in the 1930s. The anticommunism that he came to articulate so vigorously in the late 1940s and 1950s finds its origins in his antifascism of the earlier decade. The common denominator

9. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 34. For a historically grounded reflection on the evolutions of various realist theories within international relations, see Marc Trachtenberg, *The Cold War and After: History, Theory, and the Logic of International Politics* (Princeton, NJ, 2012), 3–43.

is Niebuhr's aversion to totalitarianism, which he regarded as the ultimate idolatry of the state. Similarly, some of the institutional platforms that Niebuhr employed in his Cold War activism had their birth in his earlier interventionism, such as the journal *Christianity and Crisis* and the organization Americans for Democratic Action. In short, the Niebuhr of the Cold War cannot be understood apart from the Niebuhr of the 1930s.

Third, during this decade Niebuhr exercised a profound influence on American Protestantism's views on international politics, particularly in leading many American churches and clergy to shift from pacifism to interventionism. In the aftermath of World War I's carnage and failed postwar settlement, most American Protestants had become disillusioned with war. Into the 1930s, this ethos combined with the Great Depression to produce a general disposition against war or even international engagement more generally.<sup>10</sup> Into this milieu Niebuhr emerged as an articulate and impassioned critic of pacifism, and a theological proponent of maintaining international order and resisting injustice, even with impure motives. In Craig's words, Niebuhr "almost singlehandedly overhauled the political culture of liberal American Protestantism."<sup>11</sup> In a nation with a democratic political system and a predominantly Protestant culture, this was no mean accomplishment. As Andrew Preston describes, Niebuhr's Christian realism "provided Americans with a theology and a morality for military intervention" and thus helped establish public support for the eventual American entry into the war.<sup>12</sup> By the end of the decade, the force of his arguments combined with global events to bring many more Protestant supporters behind the war effort.

The fourth reason follows from the third, for it was during this decade that Niebuhr exerted a growing influence on American foreign relations overall. Here the distinction between *foreign policy* and *foreign relations* becomes critical. In Preston's distillation of how to understand religion's historical influence on America's international role, *foreign policy* "examines only the formulation and execution of actual government policy, while [*foreign relations*] includes policy but also a wider array of American interactions with the world."<sup>13</sup> So while Niebuhr played little role in crafting the specifics of President Roosevelt's foreign policy, practitioners such as Kennan read him regularly even during this decade, anticipating Kennan's later consultations with Niebuhr while serving as the first director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff.<sup>14</sup> More importantly, the 1930s marked Niebuhr's emergence as an international figure, one of the most

10. On the religious origins of American intervention in World War I and subsequent postwar disillusionment, see Richard M. Gamble, *The War for Righteousness: Progressive Christianity, the Great War, and the Rise of the Messianic Nation* (Wilmington, DE, 2003).

11. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 39.

12. Andrew Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy* (New York, 2012), 314.

13. *Ibid.*, 6–7.

14. James C. Wallace, "Contained? The Religious Life of George C. Kennan and its influence," forthcoming in *Journal of Cold War Studies*. Cited with permission of author.

prominent American thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic who advanced a new set of ideas for America's role in the world and how to understand the threat of fascism. By the time the United States did enter World War II, the concepts articulated in part by Niebuhr were adopted more broadly in public discourse. While political leaders and the general public did not think and speak in Niebuhr's often abstract language, the basic ideas that he developed did resonate, such as that German and Japanese fascism represented false religions that made an idol out of the state, and posed a threat to the United States. These ideas eventually brought him to the attention of official Washington DC, including the Roosevelt White House and the United States Senate. And while Niebuhr was the most prominent of the Christian Realists, he did not act alone, but developed a transatlantic network of European and American elites, especially among clergy and intellectuals, committed to supporting the Allied cause. Many in this same network eventually helped construct the postwar international order. Mark Edwards distills the essence of this network: "If we admit that Christian Realists as a community were part-time liberal Cold Warriors but full-time pioneers of global Protestant ecumenism, then we can begin to appreciate their significance to the history of international relations. During the 1930s and 1940s, Realists contributed to the invention of a 'World Christian Community' that would act . . . as a 'moral equivalent' for and countervailing force to secular totalitarian states."<sup>15</sup> Niebuhr's contributions were thus multiple. In addition to helping build this community of transnational Protestantism, he also helped shape the intellectual and political environment in which public attitudes were shaped and policy decisions were made in his home country of the United States.

As his dispute with his brother illustrates, Reinhold Niebuhr's concern with fascism was not confined to Germany, notwithstanding his own German-American heritage, close relationships with German church leaders, and the toxic barbarism posed by Nazi ideology. Niebuhr's abiding priority was rather the global threat to international order posed by unchecked aggression from wherever it emanated. In Craig's words, "the Realist approach to international politics that Niebuhr developed from 1932 to 1944 was a distinctly defensive one. It derived from a view of human nature that made the basic will to survive a source of political existence. . . . Aggression occurred because states had transformed this will-to-survive into national wills-to-power." Nor did Niebuhr spare the United States from his concerns about aggression. While he eventually came to urge his nation's intervention into World War II, "the ideal foreign policy, in his view, was defensive: he was uninterested in national aggrandizement, and regarded expansion at best as an inevitable cost of involvement in power politics."<sup>16</sup> Moreover, Niebuhr's realism developed in response to unfolding history.

15. Mark Edwards, "God Has Chosen Us: Re-Membering Christian Realism, Rescuing Christendom, and the Contest of Responsibilities During the Cold War," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 1 (January 2009): 72.

16. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 53.



His alarm in 1931 at Japan's invasion of Manchuria did not emanate at the time from a fully orbed realism, but rather from a basic sense of injustice and an awareness of the futility of the prevailing liberal internationalist settlement. The intellectual foundations of his realism were laid in his 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, evolved over the course of the decade through both his own study and his views of international events, and came to full intellectual expression with his publication of *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* in 1944.

Like his intellectual descendants among international relations realists, Niebuhr saw life as fundamentally a clash of interests and a quest for power, an analysis that included the nation-state. Yet unlike latter-day realists who treat the nation-state's external behavior as the primary or even only concern, Niebuhr's realism looked equally at internal developments within states as potential threats to international order. Two reasons accounted for this. First, Niebuhr located the source of this quest for power not merely in the nature of the state but principally in the nature of the human person, a nature that was exacerbated by the totalitarian state. Second, Niebuhr privileged the role of ideology. In Kenneth Thompson's analysis of Niebuhr's influence on realism, "while he was willing to concede the influence of interest and power as determinants of foreign policy, he insisted that the residual force of ideology should not be overlooked."<sup>17</sup> Hence Niebuhr's realism was distinctive in its concern not merely for the international balance of power but also with the internal nature of other regimes, particularly those such as Nazi Germany. As a political doctrine Christian realism prioritized preserving a balance of competing powers—though not just between nation-states in the international system. Niebuhr was also concerned with balance within states and societies, and remained wary of concentrations of power and wealth anywhere, whether in a tyrannical government, capitalist systems and large corporations, or any other social arrangement. As he wrote in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, in every sphere of human activity, "conflict is inevitable, and in this conflict power must be challenged by power." Human nature, its egoism and avarice, embodied the seeds of these tensions because "the selfishness of human communities must be regarded as an inevitability. Where it is inordinate it can be checked only by competing assertions of interest; and these can be effective only if coercive methods are added to moral and rational persuasion."<sup>18</sup>

This focus on human selfishness marks a distinctive feature of Niebuhr's "Christian realism," which did not share the same intellectual foundation as secular realism. The latter begins with the international system as anarchic and holds self-interested nation-states to be the primary actors. Rather, Christian realism as pioneered by Niebuhr begins with a view of human nature as sinful and sees self-glorifying human beings as the primary actors. This is manifest in almost

17. Thompson, "Niebuhr and the Foreign Policy Realists," in Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, 142.

18. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York, 1932), xv, 255.

every dimension of human society, both the domestic and international spheres. As Niebuhr wrote of his appreciation for the Calvinist theological influences on the American founding, he saw “the character of politics as a contest of power, and of the necessity of balancing various centers of power in government against one another in order to prevent tyranny.”<sup>19</sup> In Niebuhr’s view, power needed to be balanced both within nations and between nations. When power became imbalanced within a nation, such as in a totalitarian state, that same state would likely soon begin to threaten the international balance of power and would need to be countered by other nations. Put in historical terms, secular realism traces its origins to the Athens and Sparta of Thucydides, while Christian realism traces its origins to the Garden of Eden of the Bible.<sup>20</sup>

Two primary questions animate this inquiry. First, why did Reinhold Niebuhr perceive (what became) the threat of fascism as early as he did, and in the manner that he did? For while in hindsight history may appear flat, linear, and almost inevitable, in context and as it unfolds it is chaotic, uncertain, and contingent. Following the narrative arc of Niebuhr’s early alarm at the ascendance of fascism reveals an acuity of vision rare among his contemporaries, even as from his perspective the decade darkened in crisis and the future remained unknown. Moreover, for Niebuhr these concerns about the trends within Nazi Germany were not merely moralistic alarms about the erosion of human rights, nor were they only intramural theological disputes between him and fellow church leaders. Rather for Niebuhr these were primarily foreign policy concerns. Specifically, in the European context he worried that developments within Germany threatened both the fragile European order and the security of the United States itself. The second question follows from the first, and that is how events in this decade shaped the development of Niebuhr’s own thought. For while he brought a certain analytical framework to his perception of developments in Europe and Asia, those developments in turn influenced the evolution of his analytical framework.

Although Niebuhr may have been prophetic about the nature of the inchoate threats emanating from Japan and Germany, he was much less certain about the suitable response. The ensuing decade would witness his own efforts to reconcile his analysis of the problem with his various inadequate and uncertain prescriptions, such as diplomatic condemnation, economic sanction, or military assistance to allies. It was not until 1939 that Niebuhr reluctantly embraced American

19. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York, 1940), 59.

20. As this article’s discussion of Niebuhr’s realism indicates, there continue to be fervent and fertile debates within political science, political philosophy, and history over the nature—or natures—of realism. Niebuhr by no means has a monopoly on definitions of realism, and many realists today would find little common ground between their realism and Niebuhr’s realism. However, as a historical matter his Christian realism stands as one, although of course not the only, important antecedent strand of influence on subsequent developments of modern international relations realism. In seeking to understand Niebuhr in the context of his times, as this article does, it would be anachronistic to retrospectively judge him by the standards of modern international relations realism.



rearmament, and not until Pearl Harbor that he came to terms with the imperative for the United States to meet force with force.

Tracing Niebuhr's concerns about the fascist threat from 1932 until America's entry into World War II a decade later also mirrors his evolution from a prophetic outsider to an influential yet ambivalent insider in American life. For these years also saw him transition from socialist opponent of President Franklin Roosevelt to a supporter of the New Deal and the Roosevelt presidency, from a proponent of the Marxist critique of capitalism to a realist and penetrating critic of Marxism, from zealous seminary professor at the margins of public life to one of America's most prominent public intellectuals and a regular presence in the corridors of power. In the process Niebuhr's position on the use of force also evolved, as he moved from pacifism, to embrace of nonviolent coercive measures such as economic sanctions, to urging American support for Great Britain's war effort, and finally to full endorsement of American military involvement.<sup>21</sup>

Intellectually this entailed Niebuhr grappling with the full implications of his own emerging realism. Particularly in the first part of the decade, his policy prescriptions were incommensurate with his moral judgments. As he eventually came to articulate, in a fallen world the use of force may be undesirable, yet it is nevertheless necessary to secure proximate justice and prevent the flourishing of unmitigated evil. Niebuhr was able to affirm this because his understandings of human nature and society were not unrelentingly bleak. In his friend Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s description, Niebuhr "emphasized the mixed and ambivalent nature of human nature – creative impulses matched by destructive impulses, regard for others overruled by excessive self-regard, the will to power, the individual under constant temptation to play God to history."<sup>22</sup> Niebuhr believed that the Christian virtues of repentance, faith, and love offered ameliorative measures against the vices and aggression that characterized the state of nature. "These attitudes of repentance which recognize that the evil in the foe is also in the self, and these impulses of love which claim kinship with all men in spite of social conflict, are the peculiar gifts of religion to the human spirit."<sup>23</sup> Here Niebuhr highlighted another distinctive element in his political thought: The dual nature of human beings as sinful and self-interested, yet also capable of love, grace, and sacrificial regard for others. One role of religious leaders and communities, he believed, was to condemn sin and proclaim grace and hope. Robust religious

21. Exploring the full range of Niebuhr's theological, economic, and political evolution in this decade is beyond the scope of this article, as is the spectrum of American public attitudes toward Japan and Germany during the 1930s. Rather, I will focus on Niebuhr's opposition to the Hitler regime and, to a lesser extent, imperial Japan, as one essential determinant of his life and thought, a determinant that at least helps illuminate his broader intellectual, religious, and political transitions.

22. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "Forgetting Reinhold Niebuhr," *New York Times*, September 18, 2005, G12.

23. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 272.

communities that maintained a prophetic voice and witness were indispensable to a free and just society and essential for international order.

The theme of the *prophetic* is essential to understanding Niebuhr during these years in which he believed civilization faced a crisis both literal and existential. As Robin Lovin observes, Niebuhr was steeped in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament, and for him “the problem of Christian ethics at all levels is to retain the prophetic grasp of ‘the total and ultimate human situation’ while dealing with immediate problems.”<sup>24</sup> For such immediate problems, Niebuhr sought to assume the role of a modern prophetic voice in three separate yet interrelated ways: To sound the alarm in Europe and America about the fascist threat; to proclaim prophetic judgment on the pacifism and isolationism of liberal Protestantism; and to defend the prophetic witness of religious communities in Germany, both Jewish and Christian, threatened by repression. In turn, these diverse roles embodied varying meanings of the term “prophetic.” As Michael Thompson writes in a probing exploration on this theme of the “prophetic” in Niebuhr’s life and thought, “prophetic, of course, doesn’t refer to the act of predicting the future; rather, for Niebuhr, the prophetic was about living in the present, in a concrete historical moment.”<sup>25</sup> Yet here Thompson is only partially correct. For Niebuhr the “prophetic” had both a present *and* future dimension. His warnings about the maladies that could result from the rise of Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan meant “prophetic” as a prediction of future peril. But his proclamations against what Niebuhr perceived as the naiveté and utopianism of liberal Protestantism embodied the meaning of “prophetic” as admonition against error in the present moment. And his defense of the rights and responsibilities of religious communities to be free to speak against the pretensions of the State fulfilled the meaning of “prophetic” as bearing a divine message for the world, with both present and future implications.<sup>26</sup> This final dimension of the prophetic represents Niebuhr’s advocacy of the liberty of religious communities to play their appointed role as mediators between state and citizen, and contributors to the public goods of a just and well-ordered society. While Niebuhr rarely used the words “religious liberty” or “religious freedom,” his defense of a protected role for religious communities in the public sphere anticipates the development of religious liberty as an international right in the postwar years.

24. Robin Lovin, “Prophetic Faith and American Democracy,” in Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, 225.

25. Thompson, “An Exception to Exceptionalism,” 834.

26. For more on this theme of the “prophetic” in Niebuhr’s life and thought, see Ronald Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (New York, 1972); and June Bingham, *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York, 1961), 244–75. See also David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 26–54 for an insightful exploration of Niebuhr’s theme of the “prophetic” in a different context, specifically his influence on Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. For a more recent treatment assessing Niebuhr’s prophetic themes in a contemporary context, see John Patrick Diggins, *Why Niebuhr Now?* (Chicago, 2011).

These different types of the prophetic were mutually reinforcing in shaping Niebuhr's own emerging role, as he brought each meaning to bear in his public voice. Yet assuming the prophetic stance also brought its own temptations. The perpetual challenge facing the prophet in any day is how to maintain critical distance while commanding the attention of your audiences yet not being compromised by the seductions of power. This prophet's dilemma, not unlike the "Puritan Dilemma" described by Edmund Morgan, followed Niebuhr on his own journey from the periphery to the center of influence in American life.<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr also faced the related prophetic dilemma highlighted by Lovin: How to address the immediate problems that constituted the "crisis" years without losing sight of the ultimate realities of life, which for Niebuhr included a transcendent hope in the divine?

Niebuhr articulated his understanding of the prophetic role in a January 30, 1935 *Christian Century* article. In his typical dialectical fashion, he contrasted what he regarded as two erroneous philosophical conceptions of the prophetic that were prevalent at the time in transatlantic intellectual and religious circles: The world-denying transcendence of Swiss theologian Karl Barth's neo-orthodoxy, and the overly immanent, secularized dogmas of Marxism. The problem with Barthian thought, Niebuhr averred, is its denial "that God works in history . . . that human actions can in any sense be instruments of God." Yet Marxism, which Niebuhr called a "secularized religion," makes the opposite error, of reducing the "prophetic idea of God" to merely "the idea of a logic in history which works towards the final establishment of an ideal society not totally dissimilar from the messianic kingdom of prophetic dreams." In both systems, "the true dialectic of Hebrew prophecy and the gospels is destroyed." Yet "the significant fact about Hebrew thought is that it neither lifts God completely above history nor identifies him with historical processes." Rather, "the God of the Hebrew prophets was transcendent as both the creator and the judge of the world . . . the transcendent God worked in history, and the prophets pointed out how he worked." And while discouraged at the prevalence of prophetic errors, Niebuhr eschewed despondency, concluding that "it is still possible to create and, above all, to reclaim a prophetic religion which will influence the destiny of our era and fall into neither defeatism nor into the illusions which ultimately beget despair."<sup>28</sup>

For Niebuhr these rival conceptions of the prophetic were not mere abstract philosophical debates but rather were determinative questions in the contest for Germany's future and the fate of Europe. Put simply, theology has consequences. Niebuhr feared that both camps in Germany that opposed Hitler—the socialists enamored of Marxist logic, and the Barth protégés among the clergy—had neither the theological convictions nor the fortitude to adequately confront the Nazi threat. The Marxists denied God's existence while clinging to a utopian hope in

27. Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (New York, 1999).

28. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Marx, Barth, and Israel's Prophets," *Christian Century*, January 30, 1935, 138–40.

history, while the Barthians denied God's work in history while clinging to a utopian hope in separating the church from the world and waiting for the spiritual kingdom to come. Though both the Marxists and the Barthians rejected Nazism, neither was theologically equipped to pronounce prophetic judgment on the Nazi system, or to raise the alarm in the West against the Nazi threat.

Moreover, Niebuhr's conception of the prophetic role helps illuminate his particular concern for two communities in Germany especially imperiled by the Nazi regime: Jews and the Protestant Confessing Church. Their religious and cultural differences notwithstanding, both the Jewish community and the Protestants who resisted Nazi control shared a common grounding in the Old Testament prophets, and thus, Niebuhr believed, could bear witness against Nazi oppression. As he observed the growing fanaticism and tyranny enveloping the citizens of his ancestral homeland, Niebuhr worried especially about the acute threat to the religious autonomy of these prophetic voices.

Niebuhr's concern over Germany predated, and even anticipated, Hitler's demagogic accession to power. Following a 1930 visit to Germany, Niebuhr combined his pessimism about Germany with his critique of Protestant optimism in an article with the bracing title "Let the Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves!" In it Niebuhr contrasted the buoyant assessment of Europe offered at the time by most liberal American clergy with his own foreboding. "The growing anger of the German people over the economic slavery to which the treaty of Versailles condemns them, voiced particularly in the Hitler movement, threatens not only the parliamentary government of Germany but the whole peace of Europe." Niebuhr attributed this difference between himself and the mandarins of liberal Protestantism not to contrasting perceptions over conditions in Europe but to the contrasting theological prisms through which they viewed events. "Liberal religion has a dogma and views the contemporary world through the eyes of this dogma . . . that the world is gradually growing better and that the inevitability of gradualness guarantees our salvation." As an alternative, Niebuhr offered not pessimism but realism. "It is the business of true religion to preach repentance without reducing man to despair and to preach hope without tempting him to complacency."<sup>29</sup> Almost two years before Hitler took formal power as Germany's chancellor, Niebuhr outlined the theology that would shape his opposition to the Nazi regime.

Curiously, while hindsight may appear to vindicate Niebuhr's prophetic warnings about the nature of fascism and the prospect of a European war almost a decade before it erupted, the context of his day makes his perspective all the more intriguing. As demonstrated by Michaela Hoenicke Moore's recent magisterial study, the American people in this era were hardly alarmed by—or even much interested in—developments in Germany, but rather in the main

29. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Let the Liberal Churches Stop Fooling Themselves!," *Christian Century*, March 25, 1931, 402–4.

remained ambivalent, indifferent, and inwardly focused on the travails wrought by the Great Depression. In Moore's summation of prevailing American attitudes,

Hope that the Nazi party's governmental responsibility would bring about moderation prevailed in 1933 and beyond. During the so-called great debate of 1939-41, most Americans remained skeptical of the interventionists' claim that Nazi Germany was bent on a quest for world domination and constituted a serious threat to their security. Finally, it was a year later, in 1942, when the first substantiated information on the systematic murder of European Jews reached Allied Governments and the public, that the inability or refusal to believe again played a crucial role. Germany's war aims and the crimes committed pursuing them were in fact worse than what most Americans imagined and were ready to believe.<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, as Moore demonstrates, some Americans based in Germany such as journalists William Shirer and Dorothy Thompson from very early identified Hitler and Nazism as a malevolent force. But even they only began to perceive this after Hitler took power and established the Third Reich in 1933. In Moore's words, "at first, Thompson had spectacularly underestimated Hitler when, after interviewing him in 1931, she concluded that he was an insignificant and ridiculous figure."<sup>31</sup> This stands in marked contrast to Niebuhr's prescient alarm about Hitler from his visit to Germany in 1930. Ironically, this also reveals one of the few weaknesses in Moore's otherwise authoritative book. She neglects to even mention Niebuhr as a figure of any importance until a decade later when the United States had entered the war, at which juncture Niebuhr suddenly enters her narrative as a figure of acclaim for his sophisticated thinking about the postwar challenges of German reconstruction.

Into this atmosphere of American indifference, liberal Protestant pacifism, and the encroaching Nazi repression of Jews and cooptation of German Christians, Niebuhr developed his prophetic platform. Hitler's consolidation of power in early 1933 provoked in Niebuhr a mixture of resignation and indignation. He bitterly observed the perverse symbolism represented by the Potsdam Garrison Church as the site where the new Nazi Reichstag "abolished parliamentary government and instituted a dictatorship by an overwhelming vote." The German church's capitulation was not merely symbolic. The "Protestant church in Germany has on the whole fallen under the spell of Hitlerism," he lamented, while at least German Catholicism attempted to negotiate a settlement with the Nazis that would allow it some measure of autonomy. "But German Protestantism which claims to abhor the corruption following upon Catholic meddling in politics

30. Michaela Hoenicke Moore, *Know Your Enemy: The American Debate on Nazism, 1933-1945* (New York, 2010), 10.

31. *Ibid.*, 54. Interestingly, Thompson and Niebuhr would later work together as cochairs of the wartime organization American Association for a Democratic Germany.

and which claims to stand completely above politics is at least 75 per cent in the Hitler camp.”<sup>32</sup>

The question of the German church’s role under Nazi rule became a regular preoccupation for Niebuhr, even as he continued to probe the nature of the new regime. In June, 1933 he wrote a searching article on “Religion and the New Germany.” Describing Hitler’s imposition of a “totalitarian state . . . which exercises authority over every type of human association and assumes direct control of all organizations,” he lamented that this signaled the likely elimination within Germany of any critical voices or constraints against the Nazi state, and would thus leave the regime unrestrained to engage in internal oppression and external aggression. This article also appears to mark Niebuhr as among the very first—if not the first—observers to use the new term “totalitarian” to describe the emerging Nazi regime. In identifying this critique of fascism, Niebuhr also anticipated his later Cold War opposition to the Soviet Union under a similar rubric of antitotalitarianism.<sup>33</sup>

Niebuhr also noted with curiosity that “the strongest opposition has arisen from the church.” While within German churches the majority of clergy and laity identified themselves as “German Christians” loyal to the Third Reich, a courageous minority of congregations and pastors refused to go along with Hitler’s program. Yet even they elicited Niebuhr’s concern. “Though the church is making this heroic effort to preserve its independence, it does not seem to me that it has been equally brave in dissociating itself from the extravagances of Nazi terror.” This was particularly acute in the plight of the Jews. “In dealing with anti-Semitism the church has . . . been so busy preserving its own moral integrity that has had nothing to say to the state.” Furthermore, “the German church is not any more critical of the Nazi program as a whole than of its anti-Semitism.” While Niebuhr applauded the exertions of some German church leaders to resist Nazi control, he found unconscionable their comparative silence in speaking out against the Nazi agenda of oppression, militarism, and racial fanaticism. Here he fingered his familiar theological foe of Neo-Orthodoxy. While Barthian clergy admirably resisted Nazi control, “unfortunately their position does not make for discrimination in political issues because all political life is seen as a world of nature.” He concluded by quoting an anonymous German friend who shared his critique of Neo-Orthodox quietism: “Religion has withdrawn itself in confusion from the world in which human beings

32. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Why German Socialism Crashed,” *Christian Century*, April 5, 1933, 451–53. On Nazi machinations to consolidate power, see Joachim Fest, *Hitler* (New York, 1974), 397–408.

33. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Religion and the New Germany,” *Christian Century*, June 28, 1933, 843–45. Fox notes Niebuhr’s early use of the term “totalitarian”; see Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 149. For a history of the contested concept of “totalitarianism” in twentieth-century political life and thought, see Abbott Gleason, *Totalitarianism: The Inner History of the Cold War* (New York, 1995); and David D. Roberts, *The Totalitarian Experiment in Twentieth-Century Europe: Understanding the Poverty of Great Politics* (New York, 2006).



seek light and in which they are trying desperately to save a civilization from complete disintegration. If the avoidance of the peril of barbarism has no profound religious significance, how can anything in mundane life be regarded as significant?"<sup>34</sup>

Here Niebuhr assumed two dimensions of the prophetic role: Alerting the free world to the agenda of the Nazi regime, and urging a prophetic space for the German church to stand and bear witness against Hitler's program. In this he was frustrated that his only apparent co-belligerents among German clergy resistant to Nazi control were the Barthians—who also eschewed all political involvement as the worthless matters of the world and not the redemptive matters of God. In Niebuhr's mind, an independent church free from Nazi control was much to be desired, yet was equally to be condemned if the church did not raise its prophetic voice against the idolatrous depredations of the Third Reich. Niebuhr frequently worried that German Barthians drew too much influence from the tradition of Lutheran theology, at least as it had developed in Germany. Lutheranism posited a sharp distinction between the "Two Kingdoms" of God and the world. In separating these realms so completely, Niebuhr believed that Lutheranism conceded too much latitude to the State to perpetrate injustice and even barbarism. In Niebuhr's critique, the Lutheran model permitted faithful Christians to ostensibly disregard such malevolence by the State because it was of the "Kingdom of the World" and thus of no concern to them. While Niebuhr's criticisms of Lutheran political theology had elements of caricature and distortion, indisputably some of these strains of indifference to politics had influenced the Neo-Orthodox hesitancy to denounce Nazism. Yet the other option was even worse to the point of idolatrous. As Niebuhr wrote of those Protestants who not only acquiesced in but endorsed Hitler's rule, "the 'German Christians' who are behind the Nazi program are so impossible in their anti-Semitism that my sympathies are naturally with the more Lutheran church leaders."<sup>35</sup>

If 1933 found Niebuhr frustrated with his fellow Protestants, he was horrified at conditions facing Germany's Jews. That year he wrote a disturbingly prescient *Christian Century* article on the early Nazi pogroms. The American Jewish Congress reprinted and distributed the article, along with an appreciative cover note that made clear the organization's hopes for more Christian voices to come to the defense of German Jews. "This article, better than any that we have seen, describes the terrible anti-Semitic conditions, the intellectual and moral thralldom in which the Germans are held by the Nazi tyranny and, above all, the ethical challenge which confronts every decent Christian community throughout the civilized world."

34. Niebuhr, "Religion and the New Germany," 843–45.

35. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Notes From a Berlin Diary," *Christian Century*, July 5, 1933, 872–73. For more on the theological traditions influencing German Protestantism, see the unsigned editorial "Ordeal of German Protestantism," *Christian Century*, July 12, 1933.

Niebuhr opened the article with an unsparing assessment of the Nazi regime's treatment of Jews in its first months of holding power. "Evidences multiply that the German Nazi effort to extirpate the Jews in Germany is proceeding with unexampled and primitive ferocity . . . the Nazi government is determined to reduce the Jews to second-rate citizenship and to destroy their livelihood." Niebuhr also condemned the German people for their apparent yet inexcusable ignorance of this campaign. "They know little of what goes on in Nazi barracks, concentration camps, and Nazi hide-outs. There Jews are brought, frequently unmercifully beaten and sometimes killed." Searching for a proper response, Niebuhr found few good options and much to lament. "One wonders whether anything can be done to prevent one of the darkest pages in human history from becoming even more tragic." Noting the boycott of German goods called for by Jews outside Germany, his worry echoes with chilling hindsight. "This boycott is like waging a war against a nation which holds over a million of your own hostages and which may be sufficiently angered . . . to exterminate the hostages." Realizing that Jewish efforts alone would little avail, he instead called on his fellow Christians to come to their defense. Yet in a familiar lament, while some British church leaders had condemned Nazism, he found the stance of the churches in both the United States and Germany wanting. Despite their silence, "the Christian churches of America therefore have a clear obligation laid upon them to offer every possible resistance to the inhumanities of the present German regime" particularly by pressuring the U.S. Government to respond. Meanwhile, "unfortunately not a great deal can be expected of the German church since it has been brought completely under government control." Alluding to the potential exception of the Neo-Orthodox, he conceded there are "elements in the church who are strongly opposed to these doctrines. But they are so preoccupied with the problems of the autonomy of the church and with the effort to prevent aryanizing the church that they will have little to say upon the anti-Semitism of the state."<sup>36</sup>

Niebuhr's angst in this article reflects his own dilemma of how to respond to the Third Reich. Niebuhr's vague policy prescriptions calling for "pressure" and rhetorical denunciations were not commensurate with his moral outrage. It would still be several more years before he would embrace the use of military force, yet even at this early stage he seemed to realize the futility of nonviolent measures in the face of Nazi savagery. The hard realities of world events in tandem with his own intellectual evolution would in time bring Niebuhr to support war. In this sense, it would be a matter of his politics and ethics catching up with his theology.

Meanwhile, amidst Niebuhr's continuing broadsides against Barthianism and its purported abdications of political responsibility, 1934 brought a notable development among German church leaders that in Niebuhr's mind embodied the strengths and weaknesses of the Neo-Orthodox stance. Though a Swiss national

36. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Germany Must Be Told!," *Christian Century*, August 9, 1933. Reprinted version by American Jewish Congress. Box 19, Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

himself, Karl Barth had been resident in Bonn for several years as a theology professor. Working with the leaders of the “Confessing Church” of German Protestants who rejected the Nazi church of the “German Christians,” Barth drafted a manifesto known as the Barmen Declaration. Commonly regarded today as a landmark of religious liberty and one of the most significant church statements of the twentieth century, the Barmen Declaration was issued on June 4, 1934 on behalf of the Barmen Synod of Lutheran and Reformed clergy. It boldly asserted the spiritual and organizational loyalty of the church to Jesus Christ. It denounced the Nazi state’s pretensions to totalitarian rule, and the “German Christians” for their subservience to the Third Reich. But the Barmen Declaration remained silent on anti-Semitism and Nazi ideology.<sup>37</sup>

A few Confessing Church pastors such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer had pushed for the Barmen Declaration to make an explicit condemnation of anti-Semitism, yet their efforts fell short to the spirit of compromise and the desires of Barth and others to attract as many signatories as possible by focusing solely on the Confessing Church’s spiritual prerogatives. In this regard, the subsequent fates of Barth and Bonhoeffer illustrate of the implications of their respective theologies. Barth refused to swear the oath of allegiance to Hitler demanded of all professors at German universities. Being thus no longer welcome in Germany, in 1935 he fled to his native Switzerland, where he spent the next several decades teaching and writing landmark works of theology. Bonhoeffer, with Niebuhr’s help, secured refuge in the United States through a faculty position at Union Theological Seminary. But a crisis of conscience compelled him to return to Germany after just two months, to pastor the Confessing Church and to join the resistance movement. Eventually arrested for his involvement in the plot to assassinate Hitler, Bonhoeffer spent two years in a concentration camp before being executed on April 30, 1945, just one week before the war’s end.<sup>38</sup>

The middle years of the decade brought in Niebuhr’s eyes a metaphorical sifting of the wheat from the chaff in the German churches. Even as the majority of German pastors had embraced Nazi control, either out of fear or fascist sympathies, in 1936 remnants of the Confessing Church continued to resist the Third Reich. Niebuhr called a statement of protest sent to Hitler by a group of pastors “probably the boldest document penned in Germany in recent years” and “in the

37. For an authoritative treatment of the “German Christian” movement, see Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton, NJ, 2008). Reinforcing Niebuhr’s assessment, Heschel writes that “the Confessing Church, which eventually attracted about twenty percent of Protestant pastors, remained a minority opposition group – not in opposition to Hitler or the Nazi Reich, but in opposition to the German Christian movement for its efforts to undermine Christian doctrine.” Heschel, 4.

38. For more on the Barmen Declaration and the Confessing Church, see Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia, PA, 1976), 235–55; Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 1906–1945* (New York, 2010), 161–64; Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy* (Nashville, TN, 2010), 220–29. For further Niebuhr critiques of Barthian theology in the German context, see Reinhold Niebuhr, “Barthianism and Political Reaction,” *Christian Century*, June 6, 1934, 757–59.

best tradition of Christian resistance to secular power” comparable to “Thomas More’s defiance of Henry VIII.” This is a remarkable assessment from Niebuhr, and possibly overwrought, in light of the more prominent Barmen Declaration of two years earlier. But by Niebuhrian standards this statement was more significant because it protested the imprisonment of over 700 dissenting pastors, denounced anti-Semitism and racial pride as antithetical to Christian orthodoxy, and defied the “the cornerstone of nazi religion, the deification of Hitler and of the nation.”<sup>39</sup> Here was the heart of Niebuhr’s opposition to Nazism: He saw it not as a secular ideology but as an idolatrous, pagan religion. Hence his assertion in another commentary on the plight of the German church a few months later that “the Christian church is not primarily a religious institution fighting secularism. It is or ought to be a Christian community, rooted in the Christian faith and fighting paganism.”<sup>40</sup> And Nazism he believed to be paganism incarnate.

As world events beyond Germany captured Niebuhr’s attention, so did what he regarded as the fecklessness of liberal Protestantism in England and the United States. The failure of economic sanctions to reverse fascist Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 caused many Christians to cling to pacifism as their only remaining hope. Niebuhr found this simplistic, naïve, and even dangerous. “Unfortunately individualistic perfectionism cannot escape the complexities of politics so easily. The widespread pacifism in Britain today may become a force for the prevention of war. But it may also help aggravate the anarchy of Europe.” Pacifism’s errors were many, but most fundamentally arose from the facile moralism that he believed corrupted realistic thinking and effective action. “Moralistic Christianity imagines that there are simple and direct methods of applying Christian ideals of love to the complexities of politics. The error of this idea lies in the fact that politics is a realm in which life is always in conflict with life and interest contends against interest.”<sup>41</sup> Niebuhr tempered his support for sanctions against Italy with a sense of foreboding at what might lie ahead, warning that “unwillingness to run some risk of war in the present moment means certain war in the future.”<sup>42</sup>

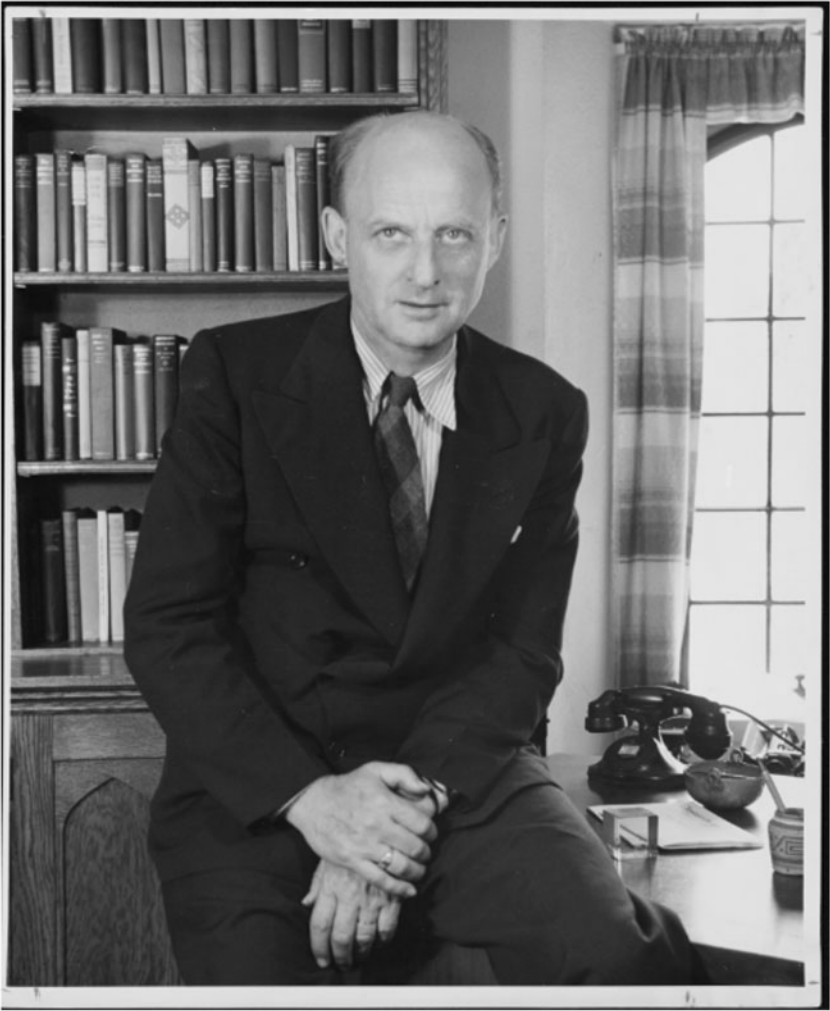
Japan’s invasion of China in 1937 turned his attention back to Asia. He expressed dismay that the neutrality laws passed by Congress effectively prevented the United States from coming to China’s aid. This undermined America’s own interests, and elicited from Niebuhr frustration and a prophetic warning. “Not only every moral factor but every consideration of political expediency dictates American friendship for China against Japan. If Japan succeeds in consolidating a great Oriental empire, even the Pacific will not

39. Reinhold Niebuhr, “German Church Girds for Battle,” *Christian Century*, August 26, 1936, 1129–30.

40. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Church in Germany,” *The Intercollegian and Far Horizon*, February 1937, 93–94.

41. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Britain Bewildered,” *Christian Century*, August 12, 1936, 1081–82.

42. Quoted in Bingham, *Courage to Change*, 245.



**Figure 2:** Reinhold Niebuhr in his office at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

preserve our vaunted isolation.” After all, “the more we fear to resist aggression now by nonmilitary means because we fear that even such means might lead to war, the more certain will we be to meet ultimately a foe who has strengthened himself during our days of hesitation.”<sup>43</sup> Echoing his warnings in the context of Europe, Niebuhr also worried that in Asia a failure to confront imperial

43. Reinhold Niebuhr, “America and the War in China,” *Christian Century*, September 29, 1937, 1195–96.

belligerence fueled both a dangerous power imbalance and a growing threat to American security, because an emboldened Japan might eventually target the United States. Waiting made matters worse. Here Niebuhr found himself appreciating what Richard Fox describes as “Roosevelt’s Jesuitical reading of the neutrality law,” in which the American president refused to legally “find” a state of war existing in Asia. Roosevelt thus circumvented the strictures of the neutrality laws and enabled some American military aid to flow to China.<sup>44</sup>

Against the influential Christian pacifists who denounced the use of any American economic measures against Japan, Niebuhr’s response was unsparing. While acknowledging the value of pacifism as a “living testimony against the kingdoms of the world,” he insisted that pacifists also realize their position “is a parasite on the sins of the rest of us, who maintain government and relative social peace and relative social justice.” Yet he counseled a realistic understanding of his own position in support of punitive sanctions on Japan. “Through this Christian perspective all efforts to achieve relative justice in the world are revealed for what they are: contests of power in which the weak seek to gain sufficient strength to prevent the oppression and aggression of the strong. If they succeed they will of course be tempted to become the oppressors and aggressors. Relative justice therefore requires some measure of equilibrium of power, never completely attained, and always disturbed anew after its attainment.”<sup>45</sup> In what was emerging as his customary polemical style, Niebuhr distilled the inadequacies and deleterious consequences of his opponent’s position, advocated his preferred course of action, and then immediately cautioned against the pitfalls inherent in his own prescription. In short, the United States urgently needed to side with China against Japan in resisting aggression and restoring the balance of power in Asia. But doing so would bring its own risks to America of self-righteousness and unjust aggression.

The year 1937 also brought a significant elevation in Niebuhr’s international status and influence. He received an invitation that year to deliver the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh in 1939, arguably the most prestigious philosophical and theological lectureship in the world. Meanwhile, the Oxford Conference on Church, Community, and State, a gathering of Protestant, Orthodox, and Anglican leaders to address international issues, invited him to be a featured speaker. This gathering, the first worldwide ecumenical gathering since a similar assembly in Stockholm in 1925, occurred in the midst of a chastened milieu of growing European tensions that contrasted sharply with the heady optimism of peace and international goodwill that had prevailed at the assembly in Sweden. Niebuhr’s address to the Oxford conference commanded a standing ovation and

44. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 185.

45. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Japan and the Christian Conscience,” *Christian Century*, November 10, 1937, 1390–91.



marked his debut among the ranks of international elites.<sup>46</sup> Denouncing the “self-glorification” that he believed was the common denominator of Nazism, Marxism, and modern secularism, he proclaimed instead his distinctive Christian realism. “It is a terrible heresy to suggest that, because the world is sinful, we have a right to construct a Machiavellian politics or a Darwinian sociology as normative for Christians. What is significant about the Christian ethic is precisely this: that it does not regard the historic as normative.” Instead, Niebuhr held forward the prophetic role of the church: “The Christian gospel . . . can be preached with power only by a Church which bears its share of the burdens of immediate situations in which men are involved, burdens of establishing peace, of achieving justice, and of perfecting justice in the spirit of love. Thus is the Kingdom of God which is not of this world made relevant to every problem of the world.”<sup>47</sup>

As fervent as Niebuhr was in his denunciations of Nazism, the would-be prophet remained uncertain and ambivalent as to what policies the United States and Great Britain should adopt in response. Perhaps another challenge inherent in the prophetic role is that while warning of impending danger is one thing, prescribing just how a political order should respond to that danger is quite another. For example, while deeply critical of pacifism, Niebuhr in the 1930s still retained the socialist’s suspicion of militarization and rearmament. As late as the spring of 1938 he complained acerbically that “the billion dollar defense budget of the Roosevelt Administration cries to heaven as the worst piece of militarism in modern history . . . Our nation like England is drifting into the worst possible foreign policy. We refuse to use the non-military pressures which we have to stop the fascist nations and then build up huge armaments to fight them when they have grown strong enough to throw down the gauntlet.”<sup>48</sup> Yet despite his opposition to rearmament, Niebuhr could not marshal any convincing evidence that “non-military pressures” such as economic sanctions would be effective at that juncture in deterring German and Japanese belligerence. The European order’s further deterioration under Nazi aggression would eventually bring Niebuhr to support the use of force in response.

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46. For more on Niebuhr’s role at the conference, see Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 61–63, and Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 180–81. For more expansive treatments of Niebuhr’s involvement in main-line Protestant ecumenical organizations and foreign policy issues, see Heather Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920–1948* (New York, 1997); Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (DeKalb, IL, 2011); and Mark Thomas Edwards, *The Right of the Protestant Left: God’s Totalitarianism* (New York, 2012).

47. “The Christian Church in a Secular Age,” in *Christianity and Power Politics*, ed. Reinhold Niebuhr (New York, 1940), 215–16.

48. Quoted in Paul Merkley, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Political Account* (Montreal, 1975), 142. On Niebuhr’s conflicted and evolving views on the policy and military response to fascism, see also Gary Dorrien, “Christian Realism: Reinhold Niebuhr’s Theology, Ethics, and Politics,” in Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, 25–26.

Meanwhile, the Third Reich's annexation of Austria in early 1938 prompted Niebuhr's renewed concern at the plight of European Jewry. As he wrote at the time:

With the entrance of the Nazis into Vienna their anti-Semitic fury has reached new proportions. Here was a city in which Jewish intelligence had played a significant role in the cultural achievements of the nation, particularly in medicine and music. The Nazis swooped down upon the city and wreaked havoc with indescribable terror.... The tragic events since the taking of Austria allow us to see the racial fanaticism inherent in the Nazi creed in boldest outline. This is really the final destruction of every concept of universal values upon which Western civilization has been built.<sup>49</sup>

Niebuhr's concern about Germany's expansion was not just the disturbance it presented to European order, but the singular virulence of Nazi ideology and its threat to the prophetic role of the Jewish people and the order of civilization itself.

However, as Campbell Craig astutely observes, Niebuhr's evolving realism from 1932's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* to the eve of World War II risked being trapped in a paradox of its own making. In Craig's words, "how can a Realist who emphasizes the clash of parochial, collective egotisms possibly regard something like 'democratic civilization' as a factor in international politics?"<sup>50</sup> Craig's critique is trenchant in locating the tensions besetting Niebuhr's realism, particularly between Niebuhr's pessimistic view of human nature and his moral commitments to a particular civilization, and between his strategic realism that favored an international balance of power and his moral realism that advocated the superiority of democratic society. Yet Craig's critique is undermined by its attempts to hold Niebuhr to standards of secular realism that Niebuhr himself never embraced. As Gary Dorrien argues, Niebuhr believed "realism without a moral dimension is corrupt."<sup>51</sup> Here Niebuhr's concept of the prophetic may help address, if not fully resolve, the paradox highlighted by Craig, and illuminates the theological tenets that distinguished Niebuhr's realism from its secular variants. First, because Niebuhr was concerned with power balances *within* nations as much as between them, he believed that nations possessed a moral advantage when Christian and Jewish religious leaders played a prophetic role in restraining evil and chastening the use of power both by and within the nation. Second, he privileged democracy *because* of his realism, as the most effective system of restraint on human sinfulness. As Kenneth Thompson points out, Niebuhr "fervently believed that human imperfections necessitated checks and balances in every intellectual and political arena." Applying this to democracy,

49. Quoted in Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 95.

50. Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan*, 44–45.

51. Dorrien, "Christian Realism: Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology, Ethics, and Politics," in Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, 27.

Thompson cites Niebuhr's observation that democracy "arms every citizen with political power and the chance to hold accountable the actions of his rulers."<sup>52</sup> Third, his realism had an irreducibly eschatological dimension that prevented a descent into pessimism. He believed in the prophetic promise of divine judgment on evil and divine hope for redemption. This hope impelled the faithful to work for relative justice within their nation, and to call their nations to work for relative justice in the international order, instead of mere material interest and national aggrandizement. For all of democracy's idealistic failings, Niebuhr believed it to be the system most congenial to the prophetic role and most capable of defending proximate justice, and therefore worth defending precisely because it was democracy.<sup>53</sup>

Yet in 1938 Niebuhr feared that democracy might sign its own death warrant. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's negotiations with Hitler a few months after the Austria annexation only aroused his considerable skepticism. Writing to his close friend Will Scarlett on September 16, 1938—two weeks before Chamberlain and Hitler concluded their Munich agreement—Niebuhr lamented "isn't the world situation terrible? I'm afraid no good will come of the Chamberlain visit. It means either selling Czecho-Slovakia out or war. I hope I'm mistaken. . . . At first I had high hopes after the Chamberlain visit was announced; but as the Hitler demands began to leak out the hope vanished again."<sup>54</sup> The conclusion of the agreement two weeks later only confirmed his pessimism, and provoked his ire against its stubborn supporters such as the editorial staff of the *Times* of London. In Niebuhr's acid observation at the time, "the fact that Munich represented a tremendous shift in the balance of power in Europe, that it reduced France to impotence, that it opened the gates to a German expansion in the whole of Europe, that it isolated Russia and changed the whole course of history is not suggested in any of the *Times* editorials after the crisis."<sup>55</sup>

The announcement of the Munich agreement also marked a turning point in Niebuhr's thought that codified his emerging inclinations. Paul Merkley identifies the years 1938–1939 as the window in which Niebuhr shifted his stance on the potential use of force and embraced military mobilization by the Allies to deter and potentially confront Hitler, even if it meant war.<sup>56</sup> In an April, 1939 article titled "Ten Years That Shook My World," Niebuhr blamed the

52. Kenneth Thompson, "Niebuhr and the Foreign Policy Realists," in Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, 140, 154.

53. For Niebuhr's most expansive meditations on democracy, see Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy, and Critique of its Traditional Defense* (New York, 1944). The most authoritative treatment of Niebuhr's Christian realism in its various manifestations remains Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (New York, 1995).

54. Niebuhr to Will Scarlett, September 16, 1938; Box 27; June Bingham Collection; Reinhold Niebuhr Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

55. Quoted in Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 96.

56. Merkley, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 140–43.

illusions of religious idealism for helping cause the European crisis that began with World War I and culminated in Munich, which revealed liberal Protestantism's "inability to defend itself against lower forms of civilization in the present hour." This he traced to a misapprehension of the lessons of Versailles. "The really tragic end of a liberal culture is to be found in the peace of Munich. What was best in that culture was outraged by the peace of Versailles and what was shallowest in it came to the conclusion that the horrors of a peace of conquest could be expiated by a peace of capitulation."<sup>57</sup> As Mark Hulsether observes, "Niebuhr drew two morals from Munich. Politically, he concluded that when nations abuse power they cannot be stopped by idealistic pronouncements but must be stopped by force, and better sooner than later. Theologically, he interpreted the biblical prophetic tradition more as a defensive weapon unmasking the abuse of power, and less as a vision calling humans toward a better society."<sup>58</sup>

The outbreak of war the next year came while Niebuhr was in England preparing to travel to Scotland for his Gifford lectures. On the day he heard the radio news announce Germany's invasion of Poland, he wrote "as one who has been certain for years that this would be the consequence of 'appeasement,' I am no less shaken than those who had more hopes than I."<sup>59</sup> He persevered in delivering his lectures through the early months of the war, even to the point of speaking while the sound of *Luftwaffe* bombs hitting Edinburgh distracted his audience and drowned out his orations. These early Nazi attacks on the British Isles provided a vivid backdrop for one of the central themes of Niebuhr's lectures, which he subsequently expanded and published in two volumes as *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. In Niebuhr's words, "the temptation to idolatry" is perhaps most acute when "the nation pretends to be God"—and the severe consequences of this deification of the state could be heard and felt just outside the lecture hall. The distinguished Jewish theologian David Novak describes this view of idolatry as central to Niebuhr's ethical and political thought, and observes that such an "understanding of the ethical meaning of the prohibition of idolatry enabled him to be the most effective, proactive anti-Nazi (and later anti-Communist) Christian theologian."<sup>60</sup> Completing the lectures on November 1, he returned to the United States and threw himself into the interventionist cause. In doing so, he found himself breaking sharply with longtime friends and longtime affiliations. But such, he believed, was the calling of the prophet.

57. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ten Years that Shook My World," *Christian Century*, April 26, 1939, 542–43.

58. Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941–1933* (Knoxville, TN, 1999), 15.

59. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Leaves from the Notebook of a War-Bound American," *Christian Century*, October 25, 1939, 1298–99.

60. David Novak, "Defending Niebuhr From Hauerwas," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40, no. 2 (June 2012), 281–96. The Niebuhr quotations also come from this article.

Foremost among these rifts was with his erstwhile socialist and pacifist allies. Of the former, he wrote an article in the *Nation* titled "An End to Illusions" announcing his resignation from the Socialist Party in response to its demand that he remain neutral on the war. Niebuhr acerbically replied that

the Socialists have a dogma that this war is a clash of rival imperialisms. Of course they are right. So is a clash between myself and a gangster a conflict of rival egotisms... Hitler threatens the world not merely because the democracies were plutocratic and betrayed by their capitalist oligarchies. His victories thus far are partly due to the fact that the culture of the democracies was vapid. Its political instincts had become vitiated by an idealism which sought to extricate morals from politics to the degree of forgetting that all life remains a contest of power. If Hitler is defeated in the end it will be because the crisis has awakened in us the will to preserve a civilization in which justice and freedom are realities, and given us the knowledge that ambiguous methods are required for the ambiguities of history.<sup>61</sup>

Niebuhr's break with socialism spilled into his increasingly public role and into a mutual embrace with the interventionist camp. After his erstwhile friend-turned-rival Norman Thomas of the Socialist Party testified before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee against the Roosevelt Administration's Lend-Lease program of aid to the Allies, some Senators who supported the Administration invited Niebuhr to respond in defense of Lend-Lease. In testimony featured in the *New York Times*, Niebuhr appeared before the Committee in January 1941 and repeated his comparison of the Nazi regime to gangsters who cannot be appeased and who inevitably posed a threat to America:

A group of gangsters who posted sentries at our doors and gates, without invading our home, and proceeded to levy tribute on our business, and assumed the right to determine the conditions upon which we could maintain contact with the outside world would confront us with a situation hardly less tolerable than the violations of our home.

Niebuhr also endorsed the Lend-Lease bill as a "statesmanlike" measure. While he conceded to the Senate that such steps could bring the United States closer to war, he also issued his familiar warning disabusing the anti-interventionists of their hopes of avoiding war. "Nations which try to eliminate every risk of war with too great caution may face the horrors of war the more certainly." Niebuhr's immersion in the cause also led him to join, often in leadership roles, virtually every interventionist organization under the sun, including William Allen White's Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies, the American Friends of

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61. Reinhold Niebuhr, "An End to Illusions," *The Nation*, Fall 1940. Reprinted in *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York, 1940), 167–75.

German Freedom, and the Inter-Faith Committee for Aid to the Democracies, as well as helping to found the Union for Democratic Action.<sup>62</sup>

His former Socialist friends were not the only ones to bear his displeasure. Niebuhr was equally unsparing in his rupture with the *Christian Century* and its editor Charles Clayton Morrison. As the anti-interventionist Morrison took an increasingly staunch editorial line in favor of continuing American neutrality, Niebuhr could no longer abide writing regularly for a journal at such cross-purposes with his own convictions. Seeking an alternative platform, he released a compilation of essays in a 1940 volume titled *Christianity and Power Politics*. In the preface, he made clear that the war provided the animating purpose of the book. "Modern Christian and secular perfectionism, which places a premium upon non-participation in conflict, is a sentimentalized version of the Christian faith and is at variance with the profoundest insights of the Christian religion." Even his *apologia* for including in the book essays that had been overtaken by events revealed his self-identification with the prophetic role: "they have been included... because in some cases the prophecies which they contained have been all too fully fulfilled, while in other cases they have been proved wrong by current events because they did not measure the tragedy of this era in sufficient depth." One chapter contained the prophet's biting farewell to his former colleagues at the *Christian Century*:

The *Christian Century* has consistently criticized President Roosevelt for not being absolutely neutral. It seems not to realize that this means to condone a tyranny which has destroyed freedom, is seeking to extinguish the Christian religion, debases its subjects to robots who have no opinion and judgment of their own, threatens the Jews of Europe with complete annihilation and all the nations of Europe with subordination under the imperial dominion of a "master race."<sup>63</sup>

If a prophet is not without honor except in his hometown, then neither, Niebuhr believed, was his voice held in honor any longer in his erstwhile home journal. Following a heated exchange of personal letters with Morrison, Niebuhr completed his divorce from the *Christian Century*.

In another chapter in this book, Niebuhr explored the difficulties that bedeviled democracies in responding to emerging security threats. Like other observers ranging from Alexis de Toqueville to Kennan, Niebuhr identified a "natural

62. Merkley, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 148–51; Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 197–99; "Gerard Would Declare War," *New York Times*, January 31, 1941, 1:5. Doenecke, "Reinhold Niebuhr and His Critics," 462–63.

63. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christianity and Power Politics* (New York, 1940), ix–xi, 44. For a comparative overview of various attitudes of American religious leaders to the rise of Nazism, see Joseph Loconte, ed., *The End of Illusions: Religious Leaders Confront Hitler's Gathering Storm* (Lanham, MD, 2004). For a nuanced treatment of the interventionist debates in the two years before Pearl Harbor, see Justus D. Doenecke, *Storm on the Horizon: The Challenge to American Intervention, 1939–1941* (Lanham, MD, 2000).



weakness of democratic government in the field of foreign policy." Democracies, he believed, were incapable of either perceiving challenges from abroad or of acting "with the same foresight and ruthlessness as the tyrannical nations." Comparing the British public's complacency toward the Munich agreement with the regnant isolationism of his own nation, Niebuhr complained that "in both cases the general public did not understand strategy well enough to know that by yielding to a tyranny now, or by sacrificing allies and refusing them help, it was merely hastening the day when it would have to face the same tyranny with fewer resources." The issue of resources particularly concerned Niebuhr and shaped one of his distinct concerns about the Nazi regime. He warned of "the peril of a competitor in the world markets who will, for the first time in history, combine slavery with technical efficiency.... A Nazi imperialism, unifying Europe, exploiting all the resources of a continent with modern skill and the slave labor of a subject peoples, will be a new kind of competitor."<sup>64</sup> This concern also marked a new dimension in Niebuhr's geopolitical analysis. Most of his previous warnings had focused on what he believed to be the toxic combination of racist barbarism and idolatrous expansionism that animated the Third Reich. To this he now added the worry that the Nazi regime possessed a unique advantage in exploiting resources to increase its strength and thus gain an insurmountable geopolitical advantage over the complacent United States.

Seeking to pierce this complacency and challenge the *Christian Century's* monopoly among mainline Protestant journals, in early 1941 he and fellow interventionists Henry Van Dusen and Frances Miller launched a rival biweekly, *Christianity and Crisis*, explicitly committed to raising a new prophetic voice on behalf of intervention.<sup>65</sup> Niebuhr authored the inaugural editorial that made clear the journal's purpose. "American Christianity is all too prone to disavow its responsibilities for the preservation of our civilization against the perils of totalitarian aggression... in this instance, the immediate task is the defeat of Nazi tyranny."<sup>66</sup> Their focus on the Nazi threat did not preclude a growing concern about developments across the Pacific. An editorial the next month on the "Crisis in the Far East" described Imperial Japan's ideology in terms strikingly similar

64. Niebuhr, "Democracy and Foreign Policy," in *Christianity and Power Politics*, 65–73. Recent historical scholarship by Adam Tooze challenges this once-prevalent view of the economic might of Nazi Germany, which as Tooze demonstrates possessed more structural vulnerabilities than realized at the time. See Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy* (New York, 2007).

65. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 193–97.

66. "The Christian Faith and the World Crisis," *Christianity and Crisis*, February 14, 1941, 4–6. Not all scholars believe that the efforts of Niebuhr, Van Dusen, and Miller to position *Christianity and Crisis* as a responsible and measured voice for intervention were successful. Mark Edwards, for example, derides them for using the journal during its early years "to revive a theocratic conception of manifest Anglo-Saxon destiny." This is overwrought and unfair, given the journal's repeated entreaties against the sins of hubris and nationalism even while engaging the war. The efforts of the editors to defend the relative good of a democratic Christian civilization against nationalistic fascism did not obviate their awareness of the shortcomings of the former. See Edwards, "God Has Chosen Us," 81.

to the Third Reich: "a deeply implanted national consciousness of 'manifest destiny' and racial superiority no less extreme and invidious, if less crude, than that of Nazi ideology. Under its rule, free and authentic Christian life is hardly more possible than in Germany." Here again Niebuhr displayed his belief in the prophetic role that the Christian church was ordained to play, especially under tyranny. While Japanese barbarity may not have descended to the genocidal depths of Nazism, Niebuhr nonetheless applied a similar Christian realist analysis to the threat posed by Imperial Japan. Tokyo's hypernationalist authoritarianism produced a domestic imbalance of power that countenanced no criticism from other internal voices such as religious institutions, while Tokyo's regional aggression produced an international imbalance of power that threatened American security. In Niebuhr's understanding, the two factors were mutually reinforcing. He did not shy from the strategic implications of his stance, asserting that against Japanese belligerence "there stands only one effective bulwark – the power of the United States, backed if need be by military threat."<sup>67</sup>

Into 1941, public sentiment in the United States remained divided on the question of war, although sympathies were moving perceptibly toward intervention. Domestic opponents of American entry into the war fell into two camps: Pacifists and isolationists. The ranks of the former, mostly liberal Protestants, had been diminishing in response to world events since Munich and the subsequent German invasion of Poland, coupled with persistent theological rebuttals from Niebuhr and his ilk. Isolationists, while not categorically rejecting the use of force in any circumstance, continued to insist that American national interests demanded staying out of conflicts in Europe and Asia. One illustration of the resilience of this sentiment came in November, 1941, when the House of Representatives voted by the narrow margin of 212 to 194 to permit the arming of American merchant ships crossing the Atlantic to supply England. Over two years since the German invasion of Poland, and on the eve of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. Congress still remained divided and hesitant over any actions that could indicate a step toward American entry into the war.<sup>68</sup>

Niebuhr's influence and audience in the intervention debate extended far beyond church pews and seminary halls. As one of the most prominent American voices on behalf of intervention, he frequently addressed a national readership in magazines such as the *New Republic*, the *Atlantic*, and the *Nation*, as well as through public lectures and radio broadcasts. One such occasion came in

67. "Crisis in the Far East," *Christianity and Crisis*, March 10, 1941, 1–2.

68. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 98–104. For an interesting assessment comparing the roles of international events and political leadership in shaping public opinion towards the possibility of war, along with relevant polling data on public attitudes from 1939 to 1941, see Adam J. Berinsky, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites, and American Public Support for Military Conflict," *Journal of Politics* 69, no. (4) (2007): 975–97. On the role of the Munich agreement in prompting a shift in domestic opinion in the United States, see also David Zietsma, "'Sin Has No History': Religion, National Identity, and U.S. Intervention, 1937–1941," *Diplomatic History* 31 (June 2007): 543–44.

May, 1941, when NBC Radio invited him to defend the interventionist position in its nationwide "Town Meeting of the Air" program. Set against the isolationist John T. Flynn of the America First organization, Niebuhr made a vigorous case for intervention on both strategic and moral grounds, distilling many of the same arguments he had been making in print. That same month also witnessed Niebuhr cofounding a new organization, the Union for Democratic Action (UDA), which brought together labor activists and other noncommunist liberals under the interventionist banner. If *Christianity and Crisis* sought to give voice to interventionist Protestantism, then the UDA sought to mobilize interventionist liberalism, and Niebuhr stood as a leading figure for both camps. In a further anticipation of the continuities between his antifascism and his anticommunism, in early 1946 Niebuhr would lead the reincarnation of the UDA into Americans for Democratic Action, the preeminent organization of Cold War liberals.<sup>69</sup>

When Niebuhr looked to the White House, he saw increasing evidence that President Roosevelt shared not only Niebuhr's geopolitical assessment of fascist regimes as a threat but also his analysis of why they posed a threat. While there is little evidence that Roosevelt read Niebuhr's writings, following 1939's outbreak of war in Europe, Roosevelt began to lambaste fascism's irreligion and state idolatry in a manner that mirrored the critique Niebuhr had been advancing for several years. Roosevelt's rhetoric may have been more populist than Niebuhr's verbosity, but the concepts were the same. For example, in a 1940 State of the Union address devoted almost exclusively to foreign affairs, Roosevelt warned the American people of Nazi designs to create a world where all people "were compelled to worship a god imposed by a military ruler, or were forbidden to worship God at all... [and] were deprived of the truth that makes men free."<sup>70</sup> In this passage, Roosevelt managed to combine fears of the fascist idolatry of the state, religious persecution, and a quotation from the Gospel of John on truth and freedom that would have been widely appreciated by the audience of the day. In Andrew Preston's persuasive account, as he led his nation toward war, Roosevelt fused together an inclusive civil religion and a commitment to religious freedom (one of his "Four Freedoms") into an antitotalitarian religious ideology. Perhaps most emblematic of this was Roosevelt's remarkable October 1941 Navy Day address, which warned of Hitler's alleged plan

to abolish all existing religions- Catholic, Protestant, Mohammedan, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jewish alike. The property of all churches will be seized by the Reich and its puppets. The cross and all other symbols of religion are to be forbidden. The clergy are to be forever liquidated, silenced under penalty of the concentration camps, where even now so many fearless men are being tortured

69. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 197–200, and Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 102–3.

70. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Annual Message to the Congress," January 3, 1940. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15856> (accessed May 9, 2013). Also cited in Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 324.

because they have placed God above Hitler. In the place of the churches of our civilization, there is to be set up an International Nazi Church— a church which will be served by orators sent out by the Nazi Government. And in the place of the Bible, the words of *Mein Kampf* will be imposed and enforced as Holy Writ. And in the place of the cross of Christ will be put two symbols—the swastika and the naked sword. The god of Blood and Iron will take the place of the God of Love and Mercy.<sup>71</sup>

In Roosevelt's jeremiad, the Nazi regime eliminated any independent religious entities that might raise a prophetic voice against it, and demanded instead not just obedience but worship of the deified state. Roosevelt's inflammatory language may have been more pungent, but his concerns were of the same substance as those Niebuhr had been voicing since Hitler had first taken power in 1933.<sup>72</sup>

Two months after Roosevelt's Navy Day speech, Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor brought his nation into the war. In a *Christianity and Crisis* editorial reflecting on the United States at last joining the fight, Niebuhr recalled the earlier missed opportunities for the West to confront fascist aggression, beginning in Manchuria and continuing through China, Prague, and Munich. All along, "the real question has not been whether the United States would become involved but when the American people could bring themselves to face the inexorable logic of our tragic contemporary history." Even now he called on the Christian church in America "to proclaim and to mediate the mercy of God that we may help our nation to live through this ordeal with fortitude and, above all, with freedom from hatred and bitterness."<sup>73</sup>

This concern for the civilizational role of the church shaped his understanding of the chasm separating the opposing sides in the war. The United States and UK, as democracies with active church communities, still retained vestiges of "Christian civilization," which Niebuhr defined in prophetic terms as "one which allows the word of God's judgment to be spoken against it, and which therefore knows itself ultimately dependent upon the mercy of God." For all of Niebuhr's admonitions against the self-interest, injustices, and imperfections of the Western world, he still believed that at a fundamental level the Axis powers represented a qualitatively worse evil. "What makes the Nazi civilization un-Christian primarily is precisely the fact that it has sought, in its boundless

71. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Address for Navy and Total Defense Day," October 27, 1941. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=16030> (accessed May 9, 2013). Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 321–26. Roosevelt speech also cited in Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy*, 16.

72. For a critical assessment of American rhetoric and policy on the eve of World War II that also assigns Niebuhr an important role in influencing Roosevelt's political-religious warnings about Nazism, see Zietsma, "Sin Has No History," 531–65. For a critique of Zietsma's methodology, see William Inboden, "The Author's Response" (Roundtable on *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment*), *Passport: The Newsletter for the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations* 40, April 2009.

73. "We Are At War," *Christianity and Crisis*, December 29, 1941, 2–3.

self-assertion and collective egotism, to destroy the possibility of a word of divine judgment being spoken against it. . . . It knows that where the gospel is preached there are limits to the pride and arrogance of man. It makes the impulse of self-glorification, from which no individual or collective human life is ever completely free, into the very norm of life.”<sup>74</sup> Nazism in particular had destroyed the very possibility of the church speaking a prophetic voice in opposition to the deified state, or of even speaking at all.

Ironically, for all of the vitriol and division that marked the prewar debates between the interventionists and the anti-interventionists (comprising both pacifists and isolationists), the American entry into the war not only ended the debate but brought new opportunity for reconciliation and cooperation. Their fervent differences notwithstanding, both camps shared a desire to create a “Just and Durable Peace,” in the name of one of the FCC’s organizations, and to build a new world order where war was less likely. As David Hollinger has insightfully explored, early in 1942 the Federal Council of Churches convened a summit meeting in Ohio at which several hundred leaders representing the gamut of opinions within the Protestant establishment came together to begin planning for the postwar order. The State Department sent a high-level representative as did several Allied governments, and the Christian Realists and pacifists found common cause in developing their ideas for international organization following the war. Many of these ideas came to institutional fruition in the establishment of the United Nations three years later.<sup>75</sup>

For Niebuhr, the war also heralded his full arrival into the corridors of American power. Within weeks of the Pearl Harbor attack, the White House’s Office of Facts and Figures (OFF) requested Niebuhr’s assistance in developing a propaganda campaign on behalf of President Roosevelt’s famous “Four Freedoms” speech. The director of the office was Librarian of Congress and noted poet Archibald MacLeish. Niebuhr eagerly complied, and travelled to Washington DC on Saturday January 31, 1942 for meetings with MacLeish and his staff. Niebuhr particularly helped shape the “Freedom of Worship” chapter of a pamphlet on the Four Freedoms. The pamphlet described the defense of the Four Freedoms as central war aims of the Allied effort, and was circulated widely throughout the United States as well as translated into numerous foreign languages and distributed overseas. The pamphlet claimed that “the democratic

74. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Idea of Christian Civilization,” *The Student Movement*, October 1941, 5–6.

75. David Hollinger, “The Realist–Pacifist Summit Meeting of March 1942 and the Political Reorientation of Ecumenical Protestantism in the United States,” *Church History* 79, no. 3 (September 2010): 654–77. For more on the influence of mainline Protestantism on the formation of the United Nations and postwar international order, see Preston, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*, 384–409; Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945–1960: The Soul of Containment*; Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order*; John S. Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights* (Washington, DC, 2005); and Mark G. Toulouse, *The Transformation of John Foster Dulles: From Prophet of Realism to Priest of Nationalism* (Mercer, GA, 1985).

guarantee of freedom of worship is not in the nature of a grant – it is in the nature of an admission. It is the state admitting that the spirit soars in illimitable regions beyond the collectors of customs.” Turning from its paean to democratic religious freedom, the pamphlet offered a stern condemnation of the other side. “Opposed to this democratic conception of man and of the human spirit is the totalitarian conception. The Axis powers pretend that they own all of a man, including his conscience. It was inevitable that the Nazis should try to deny the Christian church, because in virtually every respect its teachings are in opposition to the Nazi ideal of race supremacy and of the subordination of the individual.”<sup>76</sup> While the pamphlet’s breathless, overwrought rhetoric may not have been Niebuhr’s, its underlying concepts certainly bore his imprint. Religious communities needed to maintain their independent, prophetic voices in democratic societies, as opposed to the pagan idolatry of Nazism and its deification of the state.

With America’s entry into the war and his own ascent to prominence as a public intellectual courted by the Roosevelt Administration, for Niebuhr the prophet’s dilemma posed at the outset returned. Can a prophet work in the king’s court without compromising his prophetic voice? Further complicating this dilemma was a revealing episode from Niebuhr’s assistance to the OFF. Concurrent with the “Four Freedoms” campaign, the FBI opened a security investigation into Niebuhr. While his previous involvement with the Socialist Party and Marxist fellow travelers raised some suspicions, the FBI seems to have eventually concluded that Niebuhr was a loyal American and posed no security risk. Niebuhr himself reacted to the months-long investigation with a mixture of embarrassment, concern, and feigned insouciance, while being admittedly relieved once it concluded.<sup>77</sup>

The investigation also added a new dimension to the prophet’s dilemma, for the prophet might find that the king’s court seeks not only to co-opt him but possibly to constrain and silence him as well. Niebuhr attempted some type of resolution in a little noticed but revealing article he wrote in 1942. Its title contains his answer, in typically dialectical fashion: “In the Battle and Above It.” In Niebuhr’s words,

To be in the battle means to defend a cause against its peril, to protect a nation against its enemies, to strive for truth against error, to defend justice against injustice. To be above the battle means that we understand how imperfect the cause is which we defend, that we contritely acknowledge the sins of our own nations, that we recognize the common humanity which binds us to even the

76. January 26, 1942 memo from Cowley to MacLeish from Record Group 208, Office of War Information, Office of Facts and Figures, 1941–1942 Subject File, Box 18, Entry 7, Folder: “Publications: Four Freedoms”; Pamphlet titled “The United Nations Fight for the Four Freedoms,” Record Group 208, Office of War Information, NC-148, Entry 347, Box 1697. From National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland. Also February 10, 1942 letter from MacLeish to Niebuhr, Box 16, Archibald MacLeish Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Note that the Office of Facts and Figures was later that year renamed the Office of War Information.

77. For more on this episode, see Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 207–9.



most terrible of foes, and that we know also of our common need of grace and forgiveness.<sup>78</sup>

He seemed to address these admonitions as much to himself as to his readers. The advent of war may have meant the fulfillment of his earlier prophecies, and yet it brought new perils as well—to the soul of the nation waging the conflict, and to the role of the prophet in its midst.

Here a second dimension of the prophetic dilemma emerged: How to live faithfully in the present without losing faith in the eternal? The transition from World War II to the Cold War may have brought a dramatic new challenge in American foreign relations, but for Niebuhr it marked an essential continuity in his concerns. His antitotalitarianism, first nurtured in the 1930s through his opposition to German and Japanese fascism, now turned its prophetic ire toward Soviet communism. For Niebuhr it was merely a different incarnation of a familiar foe: The idolatry of a totalitarian state. In his vocal efforts to raise awareness and opposition to the Soviet threat, Niebuhr reached the zenith of his national and international prominence. Yet just as American postwar national security policy wrestled with the transition from demobilization to a Cold War posture that risked becoming a permanent garrison state, Niebuhr faced a similar challenge. As he became consumed by the continuing trials of the twentieth century, his theology of crisis risked becoming a permanent state of being. Could he maintain his prophetic urgency while also resting in the serenity of Christian hope? Could he continue his political efforts to steer history while still trusting in what he believed to be the divine author of history?

In wrestling with this dilemma, perhaps Niebuhr might have attended to the admonitions raised over the decades by both his beloved brother H. Richard and his sometime nemesis Karl Barth. Their own differences notwithstanding, H. Richard Niebuhr and Barth both shared a similar concern about the spiritual implications of Reinhold's political activism. H. Richard's words from their 1932 debate remained trenchant in the Cold War context: "the history of the world is the judgment of the world and also its redemption, and a conflict like the present one is . . . only the prelude both to greater judgment and to a new era."<sup>79</sup> Barth, for his part, squared off with Niebuhr in 1948 before a vast international audience at the inaugural conference of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam. Denouncing Niebuhr's prophetic activism as merely a "Christian Marshall Plan," Barth instead proclaimed the sovereignty of God and the need for humanity to live faithfully in its finitude. "The salvation of the world, which has already been accomplished, was not our work. And so also that which still remains to

78. Niebuhr, "In the Battle and Above It," *Christianity and Society* 7 (Autumn 1942), 3. I am indebted to Scott Erwin for bringing this article and concept to my attention. The few other major works on Niebuhr that feature this article include Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 107, and Kenneth Thompson, "Niebuhr and the Foreign Policy Realists," in Rice, *Reinhold Niebuhr Revisited*, 145.

79. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," *Christian Century*, March 23, 1932, 378–80.

be done—the revealing of the world’s salvation in a new heaven and a new earth—will not be our work but his. All that is required of us is that in the midst of the political and social disorder of the world we should be his witnesses, disciples and servants of Jesus.” Such words rankled Niebuhr, as they seemed to him to justify the abdication of political responsibility here on earth. He worried that Barth’s perspective enabled the Christian faith to “degenerate into a too simple determinism and irresponsibility when the divine grace is regarded as a way of escape from, rather than a source of engagement with, the anxieties, perplexities, sins and pretensions of human existence.”<sup>80</sup>

H. Richard Niebuhr and Barth may have in their own ways failed to fully appreciate the severity of the threats posed by Imperial Japan and Nazi Germany. In those particular historical moments, Reinhold Niebuhr’s prophetic role appears warranted, as do his subsequent warnings about the Soviet Union. But assuming this posture may have come at a cost. Taking Niebuhr on his own terms, arguably the greatest detriment to his prophetic role came in a diminished commitment to the eschatological hope of his own professed Christian faith. In his persistent concerns with geopolitics, in devoting himself to a constant whirl of political activism, in his immersion in the “anxieties, perplexities, sins and pretensions” of life, Barth and H. Richard worried that he risked diminishing the distinctively “Christian” dimension of his Christian realism. They worried that the prophet’s worldly realism would eclipse the prophet’s spiritual hope.

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80. Barth and Niebuhr’s Amsterdam addresses were reprinted in the *Christian Century*, along with their respective responses. Karl Barth, “No Christian Marshall Plan,” *Christian Century*, December 8, 1948, 1330–34, and Niebuhr, “We Are Men and Not God,” *Christian Century*, October 27, 1948, 1138–41. See also Barth, “Continental vs. Anglo-Saxon Theology,” *Christian Century*, February 16, 1949, 200–4. For more on the Amsterdam debate and conference, see also Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy*, 47–48, and Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 234–35. For a thoughtful comparison of the ethical thought of Barth and Niebuhr, see Novak, “Defending Niebuhr From Hauerwas.”